

RURAL WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA: Directions for Future Research*

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REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

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Latin American Research Review

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eration of their meaning within the Latin American context.³ This is not to say that such an emphasis has been unfruitful but that, as the literature itself now indicates,⁴ an urgent need has developed to reconsider theoretical and methodological approaches. In the following section, some of the problems involved in our unquestioned application of analytical categories will be highlighted, and by focusing specifically on the phrase "division of labor by sex," I will suggest how we researchers might further contextualize our terms to accommodate rural women's own construction of their experience.

BEYOND PRODUCTION?

At this point, one might be left with the impression that the theoretical perspectives employed in the literature on rural women in Latin America have seldom considered ideological features in their approaches. This is not the case, however: factors that have been variously termed as "cultural factors," "patriarchy," and "social ideology" have been introduced into a number of conceptual frameworks.⁵ But the tendency has been to view these concepts as something that "interferes with" a given (capitalist) system or as "variables" that can be conveniently employed in situations that cannot be explained in "economic" terms. Unwillingness to explore what such terms might imply for a production-oriented analysis can be seen, for example, in Jane Jacquette's statement that in order to assess women's work in Latin American agriculture, "[t]hree factors . . . need to be taken into account: degree of capitalization, class membership, and culture" (1983, 5). Yet she does not specify at all what might be meant by "culture." A similar example can be found in Anita Anand's argument that a solution to the problem of Third World women "lag[ging] further and further behind" is to employ the concept of patriarchy in development theory: "neither mainstream nor Marxist models have room for women, as neither group has addressed the problem of patriarchy" (Anand 1985, 18, 20).

It seems unlikely that simply adding this term will do much to solve any problems without first considering the extent to which patriarchy is an appropriate category for understanding gender relations in non-Western European situations. Patriarchal relations and ideologies are neither consistent nor homogenous throughout Latin America, and scholars need to know much more about how patriarchy as a process is created and maintained in the Latin American countryside. For example, we still understand little about women's role in maintaining patriarchy (in the household and in the community) in which contexts (as individuals or in groups) and for what purposes (long- or short-term gain).⁶ Furthermore, once culture is conceived as the context within which women interpret and understand their world, the context shaping their lives and

struggles within specific environments, it can be perceived that such views do little to locate potential sources of change from the point of view of rural women themselves. In this sense, the failure to explore “known” categories from rural women’s perspectives limits the explanatory power of analyses of development considerably.⁷

The widespread use of the phrase “division of labor by sex” in the literature would imply that researchers already know what is meant in the Latin American context by *division*, *sex*, and *labor*. Yet considering each term separately reveals the need for scholars to critique continually what we think we know. To open up some possibilities for critique, the following sections of this article will juxtapose two different sets of literature: anthropological literature (which most often concerns itself with Western biases in studies of non-Western societies) is set against feminist literature (concerned with sexist biases in all societies) and vice versa (compare Strathern 1987a). For example, feminist analyst Maria Mies has suggested that rather than inventing new concepts, “we have to accept that the basic concepts we use in our analysis have already been ‘occupied’—like territories or colonies—by dominant sexist ideology. Though we cannot abandon them, we can look at them ‘from below’. . . from the point of view of the historical experiences of the oppressed, exploited and subordinated and their struggle for emancipation” (Mies 1986, 47). Working with these different sets of literature illustrates that, contrary to what Mies seems to suggest, complementarity may not always exist between the sexism revealed by feminists and the historically specific constructions of “oppressed, exploited and subordinated” peoples in different societies.

“Division” as a Research Category

Surely the term most taken for granted in the phrase “division of labor by sex” is *division*, which is more often than not taken as given when a group of persons or activities appear to be “different.” The objective has usually been to describe the “division” (comparing the differences in male and female tasks) and then to explain it in terms of advantages accrued to society, capital, men, or any combination of the three, depending on one’s theoretical perspective.

Of interest here is the exploration of the concept of “difference” in recent feminist literature (for example, see the articles published in *Feminist Studies* in 1988). This literature stresses that divisions are not given entities to be described but powerful sociopolitical constructs that are paradoxically united. According to this view, terms of oppositional difference “have no fixed content, but gain their content from their diacritical relation, in which each term exists only through what makes it different from the other” (Rabine 1988, 21). While it is acknowledged that meaning

itself is made through contrast (Scott 1988, 36), this literature emphasizes that gender symbolism has been and remains an extremely potent mechanism for expressing division and difference, with the result being that "the meanings of gender become tied to many kinds of cultural representations, and these in turn establish terms by which relations between women and men are organized and understood" (Scott 1988, 3). Such distinctions are said to be inevitably expressed, at least in hierarchical societies, as dominant-subordinate dualities that "make sense" to Western researchers—public versus private, culture versus nature, men versus women, and so on. In taking a critical perspective, it therefore becomes important to expose such divisions not only as power relationships, constructed as such "for particular purposes in particular contexts" (Scott 1988, 44), but also as the framework within which women (and men) conceptualize reality, as what informs and constrains their construction of "realistic" alternatives. I will return to this point later.

A second set of works indicates that the interests being met through a particular construction of difference may not be located only within the society being considered. Anthropologists working on the possibility that more than one model of "difference" exist have asserted that notions of division and difference may be constituted in diverse ways in other societies and that researchers must remain wary of imposing their own models (Bell 1983; Weiner 1976; Strathern 1987b, 1987). For example, in comparing the Wiru and Hagen of New Guinea, Marilyn Strathern found that among the Wiru, gender differentiation is "self-signifying; the connection between the sexes is not of a relational order [as in the Hagen case], but of a juxtaposition of two interdependent entities" (Strathern 1987b, 294–95). Such findings are important because they compel scholars to recognize that what constitutes a division is not a straightforward empirical matter: analysts do not simply "see" that apples and oranges, or men and women, are distinct. Perception of what is viewed as distinct is culturally mediated by emphasis on or underplaying of particular associations ("values"). As Strathern observes, the Western "model of human enterprise . . . where everything can be measured by its relative use . . . influences the manner in which 'we' conceptualize persons and relations between persons [and] makes anthropologists ask questions about inequality wherever they encounter instituted social difference" (Strathern 1987, 285).

In this light, a feminist principle that needs to be reconsidered is that in analyzing the sexual division of labor, "we have to make clear that we mean this asymmetric, hierarchical and exploitative relationship, and not a simple division of tasks between equal partners" (Mies 1986, 46). Division cannot be assumed to translate automatically into "a hierarchy of significance" (Tiffany 1984, 6). Yet this statement does not mean that scholars should therefore expect divisions to be "complementary" in other

("non-Western") societies (McDowell 1984). To argue along this line may only replicate Western dualist models where relationships have to be either hierarchical or complementary (public or private, natural or cultural, and so on).

The point to be made here in the Latin American context is that commonsense application of the notion of division as difference involves unquestioned assumptions about the homogeneity of cultural constructions and associations (that is, that meaning is produced in a consistent and predictable way throughout the continent) and that the Western model of difference is unproblematic when applied to the Latin American cases. But as the above discussion implies, the historically specific ways in which divisions are expressed and understood is precisely what needs to be investigated rather than assumed. The important questions to be asked are several. How is "difference" itself constructed and maintained in historically specific situations in Latin America? How does the meaning of gender relationships turn on this symbolism of contrast? And, given this particular form of comparison between males and females, what are the viable alternatives for rural women in Latin America?

Some readers may doubt the relevance of such concerns for the Latin American case. It may be thought that the continent is so saturated with Western cultural values that such questions are immaterial or that the predominance of political and economic concerns overrides any need to investigate them. But one finds ample evidence in Latin American ethnographies to indicate that "different" cultural categories exist between the "North" and the "South" and within Latin America itself and that such conceptualizations are relevant to how individuals interact with the world around them (see among others Chevalier 1982; Nash 1979; Taussig 1980, 1987; Whitten 1985). To ignore this point by focusing only on the "larger" social forces at work in the countryside ultimately makes the construction of meaning and action by rural Latin Americans themselves irrelevant to analysis of development processes.

"Labor" as a Research Category

While it may seem self-evident that work is a social transaction involving notions of identity and personhood, and not merely a matter of material production (Wallman 1979), this point is often forgotten when assessing the division of labor by sex. Although it is not advisable to banish the concept of production from conceptual frameworks, as some feminist deconstructionists seem to advocate (Flax 1987), it appears necessary to emphasize the point that the term *economy* is itself a social construct, which makes it important to ask how terms such as *land*, *labor*, and *capital* (not necessarily viewed as distinct in the societies under study) are informed by particular cultural models.

One example of this kind of questioning can be found in the work of Stephen Gudeman, who notes that in the Panamanian case, rice-farming peasants viewed labor as they did land—as measured in terms of seed to be harvested rather than in terms of the expenditure of time or energy necessary to yield results: “The peasants never held . . . that property was created because labor itself generated something beyond its brute powers or that humans had a special capacity to coax from the means more than they, the humans, consumed in the process of doing so. This was not a generative but a passive construction of labor” (Gudeman 1986, 11). In this case, agricultural goods “passed through” labor and yielded property rights rather than the reverse, and as an extension of this perspective, livelihood was not conceptualized in the Western sense as a means-to-ends relationship.

It is important to note that the “Western sense” of labor is itself relatively recent. Maurice Godelier points out that classical Greek had no word for work or labor “[n]or was the fabrication of an object considered in Antiquity as a labour of transformation of nature” (1986, 134). This idea did not emerge until as late as the eighteenth century. This point raises concern about an uncritical application of such key words and should encourage scholars to question how the representations a society makes of its own environment and nature are related to its concepts of labor.

It is interesting to observe that the anthropological literature on this point has dealt with the question of male-female differences in the conceptualization of labor only in a marginal way (indeed, it must be assumed from Gudeman’s use of language that the Panamanian peasants about whom he writes are male). The feminist literature, in contrast, has revealed the extent to which the concept of labor can be genderized and the concept of gender naturalized. Ideologies and practices of men’s subordination of women often rest on the notion of (man’s) subordination of nature. Maria Mies makes this argument:

Due to the biologicistic definition of women’s interaction with her nature, her work both in giving birth and raising children as well as the rest of domestic work does not appear as work or labor. The concept of labor is usually reserved for men’s productive work under capitalist conditions, which means work for the production of surplus value. Though women also perform such surplus-value-generating labor, under capitalism the concept of labor is generally used with a male or patriarchal bias. . . . [T]he bodily means of production implicitly referred to in this concept are the hands and the head, but never the womb or the breasts of a woman. Thus not only are men and women differently defined in their interaction with nature, but the human body itself is divided into truly “human” parts (head and hand), and “natural” or purely “animal” parts (genitalia, womb, etc.). (Mies 1986, 45–46)

Viewed in this way, the sexual division of labor can thus “be paraphrased as one between ‘human labor’ and ‘natural activity’” (Mies 1986, 46).

Mies suggests that instead of this patriarchal model of analysis, researchers should incorporate women as the “first” producers (of milk and children) into their analyses and define productive labor as the labor that goes into the production of life.

Mies’s suggestion helps in assessing critically both the conventional view of what is considered “skill” and “production” and the extensive political linkages that may exist between ideas about nature, gender, and labor. But she is surely missing the point in proposing a single way in which scholars should view such activities. If current modes of analysis are permeated with contemporary Western assumptions about the purpose and “nature” of labor, as the above anthropological discussion seems to indicate, then uncritical application of such a proposal is likely to reveal more about what researchers already “know” than about what laboring means to different women in different contexts.⁸

On this point, it is interesting to note that Godelier has suggested that the Spanish word for work—*trabajo*—historically meant “a bringing into the world.” Although he has not taken up the point from a feminist point of view, this suggestion opens up the possibility that activities have not always been understood and perhaps still are not comprehended from only a Western male point of view in Latin American contexts. In this respect, researchers must be attentive to language itself when listening to rural women’s own words about their “work,” as will be shown in discussing life stories.

“Sex” as a Research Category

Not unlike the studies of the Latin American “Indian” during the 1950s and 1960s, much of the research on rural women in Latin America has assumed that the concept of “woman” is a known category. Although Fernández-Kelly notes that the literature on women in Latin America demonstrates that “the term ‘women’. . . escapes all sorts of generalizations unless questions of class, ethnicity, culture and national background are taken into consideration” (1983, 16–17), more often than not these “factors” have only been added to an essentialist view of who women “are”: “woman” has been the category within which different experiences are explored, while the question of the significance of the category itself has been left aside.

In the preceding discussion of division as difference, it was pointed out in the feminist deconstructionist literature that the category of woman rests “diacritically” on the category of man (and vice versa) and that this relationship derives its meaning from the specific histories that men and women live out. Thus insofar as the meanings of *division* and *labor* are expressed in gender terms in a given society, it seems that if all the social relationships created by and in “divisions of labor” are explored, the

category of "woman" becomes diffuse and almost redundant. As Gayatri Spivak comments, "Woman's voice is not one voice to be added to the orchestra, every voice is inhabited by the sexual differential" (Spivak 1988, 132).

Let us allow the anthropologists to interrupt the discussion here. It has already been implied that what researchers think they know about women "is bound up with culturally loaded valuations of gender, sex and power" (Tiffany 1984, 7). Thus while it might seem to be a relatively straightforward rule that we should be critical of our own models of gender before trying to understand the gender models of others, "in deliberately detaching oneself from Western stereotypes of male and female, one may well take refuge in postulates based on general theories of the person or of human nature that in the end turn out to be reference points for these very images" (Strathern 1984, 13). Remaining wary of universal applications of terms such as *sexual* and *differential*, this literature leaves open the question of whether or not either concept inhabits "every voice" in any given society.

Taken together, these two approaches indicate that we indeed need to understand more about how the category of woman hinges on how meaning is made to "work" in the Latin American context. There is a catch here, however. While these perspectives raise important questions concerning the terms used and knowledge of rural women's lives, ultimately they can also be debilitating politically: if scholars limit research to the problem of deconstructing how cultural values condition conceptions of the (gendered) person, we can all too easily sidestep the question of gender as a political identity, as a potential basis for progressive social change. Because rural inhabitants often struggle with the devastating changes taking place in the Latin American countryside as "women" and "men," to historicize research categories in a way that only marginalizes or trivializes such struggles is clearly untenable.

On this point, feminist critics of the deconstruction literature may be of some help. While it is agreed that analysts need to avoid essentialist views of "woman" by exploring how the category is created in and through cultural constructions,⁹ these critics also insist that women's active role in their self-construction should be central in analyses. As Linda Alcoff observes, "this view should not imply that the concept of 'woman' is determined solely by external elements and that the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. . . . [T]he identity of a woman is the product of her own interpretation and reconstruction of her history, as mediated through the cultural discursive context to which she has access" (Alcoff 1988, 34). This perspective thus encompasses something more than "cultural norms" and processes of "socialization" (Bourguignon 1980). It stresses the importance of women's creativity in their constructions of self within the context of their varied

and changing position within a network of economic, political, and cultural relations. The concept of woman is still viewed as a relational one that needs to be historicized, but its multifaceted, enabling potential is to be revealed in women's own interpretations of "experience." This point will be expanded in the following section.

In analyzing the phrase "division of labor by sex," something apparently simple and straightforward becomes transformed into a complex series of questions concerning meaning. Once it is understood that the division of labor by sex arises from and through what is "valued" in different societies, one can see the extensive bases from which the activities encompassed by the phrase derive their "naturalness" and their consequent potency. In this light, one can also see why political or economic strategies based on the view that the division of labor by sex is only one component of a society—something that can be separated out from other components, explained, and modified—would likely fail, at least in the long run.

Questions of conceptualization indeed become questions of power (Mies 1986, 36), and an implicit question raised by the above discussion concerns the power position from which we speak as research analysts. Does not the questioning of our concepts also require a readiness to be sensitive to and critical of our authority in the research process? It is to this question that I now turn.

SELF-CRITICAL LIFE STORIES

The task of working with difference, of revealing other women's constructions vis-à-vis the researcher's own is a task demanding what Spivak has called "double vision" (1988), a method that allows culture-bound conceptions of the world to be interrupted by other individuals' interpretations of their lives. The argument made in this section will extend this methodological point by considering self-reflexive life stories as potential sources of contrasting interpretations of "development."

In my own research, I have found the gathering of life stories to be a useful tool for identifying the parameters that I have unwittingly placed on coastal Ecuadorian women through my particular construction of womanhood. I began collecting life histories "to give women a voice," given the fact that archival data on rural women were almost nonexistent. At first I treated such histories as representations of rural women's selves that remained somehow unmediated by my presence (falling rather too easily into the unenviable role of the analyst "giving" Third World women the opportunity to speak). But once I began to understand the relating of life stories as a kind of negotiation—a matter not only of the analyst trying to "place" the women but of each interviewee trying to "place" the analyst—incongruities became apparent between their constructions of

their past and present and my interpretations of the central transitions in coastal Ecuador. For example, it became clear through recording life stories with rural women that my construction of their past (based on existing literature) as one involving a “flexible division of labor,” where women “actively participated” in agriculture, was irrelevant to the way the women themselves viewed the situation. This discrepancy I steadfastly refused to take seriously primarily because I view such a past as a politically valuable one. By failing to recognize the significance of this difference, however, I was essentially ignoring women’s creative constructions of themselves, ignoring the possibility that my construction of their past had no political value—or was of no “ancestral help”—to them.¹⁰ Failing to hear their voices as creative ones, my transcription of their life stories inevitably took on themes of victimization (Phillips 1987). Looking for evidence of women’s resistance only in articulated protests against what I viewed as the processes of women’s domestication by development on the coast, I ignored the possibility that their resistance was to be found precisely in their self-constructions.¹¹

It is in this sense that life stories can be useful in locating the constraints that researchers place on interpretations of rural women’s lives because of their particular constructions of history and development. I am not claiming that collecting life stories automatically solves the problems of ethnocentric bias, but when gathered in a self-critical way, such stories can be an excellent vehicle for highlighting the tension between how the researcher and the researched order their daily lives, thus compelling researchers to confront and question their own assumptions.¹²

Because this article began as a review of the literature, it seems appropriate to mention two exceptional published works that underscore the tremendous potential of what can be learned about Latin American women’s lives through self-critical life stories. In *Lionheart Gal* (published by Sistren in 1987) and Daphne Patai’s *Brazilian Women Speak* (1988), readers learn about women not through a kind of “master-servant feud” (Pratt 1986) that ultimately privileges the author or researcher in assessing who the Latin American woman “really is.” We learn instead through reconsidering how our modes of presentation themselves shape women’s stories in ways quite foreign to their own constructions. Despite the usual tendency for the language and literary style used in translation to flatten women’s voices into a tedious discourse, these two studies present women’s stories in the lively poetic rhythm in which they are spoken.

But because the creativity of women’s expression does not always accommodate the outsider, adopting this approach means that the researcher of these stories must be prepared to work harder. Patai rightly chastises researchers for their intolerance of those who do not speak in a manner that neatly accommodates their studies, who do not immediately “make sense” (to analysts). Sistren makes the same point by focusing on

the political dimensions of language use: "language is central to all power relations. It expresses the soul of a people. In our experience the development of Patwah [creole] expresses the refusal of a people to imitate the coloniser, their insistence on creation, their movement from obedience to revolution. Not to nurture such a language is to retard the imagination and power of the people who created it" (Sistren 1987, 17).

Does reluctance to undertake such work imply a preference for producing disabling rather than enabling histories? Does it indicate an unwillingness to share power as the authoritative research voice? These are questions that must be considered seriously in future research on rural women in Latin America. In the Jamaican case, Sistren notes that the women's testimonies "refused to become supporting evidence of pre-determined factors. They threatened to take over the entire project and they would not behave" (Sistren 1987, 15). The problems that have already been noted in the literature review indicate the importance of and the need for allowing women's "misbehavior"—their different ways of making sense—to "take over" research projects. As things stand, by focusing only on one side of the development relationship—by looking only at the impact of political and economic forces "on" rural women—researchers risk the possibility of simply replicating our own development models.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Deere and León (1987) list ten essential gains in the last twenty years regarding our general understanding of rural women in Latin America. These ten steps represent significant advances, and we have now reached a point where we need to know more about how Latin American rural women themselves would conceptualize or take issue with such contributions. What has been demonstrated here is the importance of undertaking research on the issue of how the perspectives of rural women articulate and contrast with our often Western notion of "development." It has been argued that this task is only possible if future analyses consider how rural women themselves construct their experience as Latin Americans, a consideration that must address the creative and political potential of their interpretations.

This task is not an easy one. It forces researchers to make explicit our own positions of power in evaluating rural Latin America and to recognize our great potential to silence creative voices simply by employing particular terms and presenting our development "facts" in conventional formats. It is also one that forces us to ask difficult questions and ultimately to question not only the answers but the questions themselves. It may all seem like "too much work," but one can only wonder what the women about whom we write might have to say on the matter.

NOTES

1. The terms *exclusion-integration* and *articulation*, used here to represent two theoretical positions, differ from but also parallel those employed by Tiano's (1986) analysis of Latin American women and industrial development; she notes that the two positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. See also Draper's (1985) review of theories on women's informal sector work in Latin America.
2. Long (1984) makes this point about analyses of rural societies in general; for an interesting follow-up of this idea on the Peruvian case, see Sarah Lund Skar's article in Long's (1984) edited collection.
3. In contrast, McFarland (1988) has suggested that Boserup's greatest contribution was eliminating Western ethnocentric assumptions about women's roles, an argument that cannot be supported by Latin American cases, given Boserup's labeling of Latin American agriculture as a "male farming system."
4. In her introductory essay on research on women in Latin America, Nash notes that "we have not yet moved far enough beyond a structural definition of gender role to encompass the cultural transformations that are symbols of and continue to affect women's subordination in many societies" (Nash 1986, 14). Unfortunately, the articles that follow in the collection are largely uninfluenced by this insight.
5. For example, Bourque and Warren (1981) have made a concerted effort in this direction.
6. Mallon (1986) has attempted such a project for the case of Peru, with encouraging results; see also Phillips (1989a) for the case of Ecuador.
7. Stern (1985) makes this argument for analytical categories applied to the Latin American case in general, while Collins (1986) argues similarly for the concept of "household" in the Latin American context. See also Hale (1988). She questions the applicability of development concepts (which she argues are developed on the basis of male interests and theories) to women in India.
8. By focusing on the common ethnographic statement that "women never hunt," O'Brien (1984) shows how Western ideas of what is "important" shapes researchers' knowledge of women in other societies: women "are" what they "do."
9. According to Alcoff, "Gender is not a point to start from in the sense of being a given thing but is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices and discourses" (1988, 431).
10. Maxine Hong Kingston comments on memories of her now deceased aunt: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (1977, 10).
11. Rural women's identities in coastal Ecuador are complex and, despite their self-identification as "housewives," their stories offer a cogent critique of the argument that coastal women have been domesticated by capital or the state. Phillips (1989b) fully explores the linkages among political organization, capitalist development, and rural women's layered identities as "housewives," "houses," and "gift exchangers."
12. Life histories are not new to Latin America (Bertaux 1981; Lewis, Lewis, and Rigdon 1977; Mintz 1960; Sexton 1981; Winn 1979). But the idea of being self-conscious about the editing process—analyzing how the researcher sets constraints on women's life histories and vice versa—is relatively recent. See Keesing (1985) and M. Young (1983) for non-Latin American cases. Some excellent edited autobiographies have been published about exceptional Latin American women (Burgos-Debray 1984; Barrios de Chungara 1978; Randall 1978). Camargo, da Rocha Lima, and Hippólito (1985) have noted in their review that although life histories are by no means absent from the Latin American literature, one cannot say that an overall strategy of life-history research on the continent exists. For a recent effort in this direction, see Beezley and Ewell (1987) as well as the life stories of women included in Bunster and Chaney (1985) and Ruiz and Tiano (1987).

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